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National
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The Vietnamese Leadership and The Indochina Crisis of 1979

An Intelligence Assessment

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**The Vietnamese Leadership and
The Indochina Crisis of 1979**

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Key Judgments

Over the last half century, Vietnamese leaders have displayed a remarkable ability to absorb reverses, adjust course, and push on toward their goals; purges at the Politburo level are rare in Vietnam. Although little is known about the policy preferences of individual leaders, their interpersonal relations, or how they make decisions, we can surmise that the foreign policy reverses of the last 18 months—including a war with China, a draining insurgency in Kampuchea, and an increased dependence on the Soviet Union—have tested the cohesiveness of the leadership once again.

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We have no evidence at present, however, that the Vietnamese leadership has been fragmented by the latest experience. While there may be some reordering of influence among individual Politburo members, it is impossible to say when, or even if, major changes in the leadership will occur. Much will depend on Hanoi's ability to stick to its present course in Kampuchea and on defusing its explosive relationship with China. At this point, Hanoi may still believe it can succeed in both cases.

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During the months before Hanoi's invasion of Kampuchea in December 1978 the leadership seemed to share a general consensus on policy toward Phnom Penh. We have no good evidence that anyone in Hanoi argued for trimming foreign policy goals and seeking an accommodation with China. What debate there has been over foreign policy seems to have turned on relations with the Soviet Union. There is some evidence to suggest this debate may be continuing.

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In the past 18 months the Vietnamese leadership has made a number of decisions that have produced an almost unbroken string of foreign policy reverses. Hanoi is deeply involved in a bitter war in Kampuchea that has become more costly and protracted than Vietnam expected. A budding relationship with the United States has withered. The Vietnamese improved relations with the Soviet Union only to weaken their ties with non-Communist aid donors and their South-east Asian neighbors, who were beginning to feel more comfortable with Vietnam. Finally, a strained relationship with China has deteriorated into war. Many other leaderships would be torn apart by such events. []

making the decisions of the last 18 months—as some veteran observers in Hanoi claim—it is more likely that some in the leadership are in a position to ascribe blame to others and thus reap personal benefit from the nation's setbacks. It is difficult to make statements about Vietnamese decisionmaking with confidence, but it is possible to build a circumstantial case and to speculate from it. What follows, then, is an effort to piece together how some of the fateful decisions came about, how they are related, and to speculate on the role of the major actors, and the possible effect of that role on their political standing. []

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In Vietnam's case, however, we cannot easily predict such a development; although the Vietnamese Communist Party has been led by essentially the same group of men for 50 years, we know very little about them. They are most often discussed as a group, and individual policy preferences, interpersonal relations, and the mechanics of decisionmaking are imperfectly understood. Conventional wisdom—based largely on repetition and some imaginative tea leaf reading—divides the leadership into various overlapping groups: a pro-Soviet faction, a pro-Chinese faction; pragmatists, ideologues; northerners and southerners. Although there seem to be elements of truth in such formulas, none is totally satisfactory. []

Key Figures

Ten men seem to have been most actively involved in the foreign policy decisions of the last 18 months:

Party Leaders

Le Duan, 72, is Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party and first among equals. Duan is generally regarded as more versed in internal affairs, and has traveled little outside the Communist world. []

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Truong Chinh, 71, is the second-ranking Politburo member and one of the party's leading theoreticians. Chinh, doctrinaire and inflexible, is thought to be anti-Western and anti-Soviet. Chinh has often been characterized as pro-Chinese, but it is more accurate to regard him as a devotee of Maoist ideology than as an advocate of a political alliance with Beijing. Like all Vietnamese leaders, he is intensely nationalistic. []

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Pham Van Dong, 73, is Premier and a member of the Politburo. Dong, who has had extensive contacts with foreigners, is regarded as Chinh's opposite—flexible and pragmatic. []

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The Vietnamese leadership is not a total enigma, however. Certain qualities common in first-generation revolutionaries have long been associated with it. It has shown itself to be dedicated to the point of being single minded, patient, disciplined, resourceful, and intensely nationalistic. Perhaps more than anything else, it has demonstrated an ability to absorb reverses, adjust its course, and proceed toward its goal; purges at the Politburo level are rare in Vietnam. []

Individual leaders, however, have seen their influence wax and wane as a result of wrong decisions. While it is conceivable that Vietnam's leadership was united in

Party leaders



Le Duan



Truong Chinh



Pham Van Dong



Pham Hung



Le Duc Tho

Military Leaders



Vo Nguyen Giap



Van Tien Dung

**Foreign Policy
Technicians**



Nguyen Duy Trinh



Nguyen Co Thach



Phan Hien

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Pham Hung, 67, Politburo member and an economic and agrarian specialist, may have helped organize Hanoi's puppet regime in Kampuchea—a role similar to the one he had in South Vietnam during the war. []

Le Duc Tho, 69, is a Politburo member and head of the party's Organization Department. Tho also allegedly played a major role in setting up the puppet regime in Phnom Penh, and may head a Vietnamese committee that oversees assistance to Kampuchea. []

Military Leaders

Vo Nguyen Giap, 67, is a Politburo member and holds the positions of Minister of National Defense and Vice Premier. Giap is thought to be an opponent of Truong Chinh. General Giap has been described as very anti-Western. Despite his defense portfolio, he no longer seems to be the power he once was in either the party or the Army. []

Van Tien Dung, 62, is a Politburo member and Chief of Staff. Dung, who planned the final offensive against South Vietnam, may be the most influential military man in Vietnam. []

Foreign Policy Technicians

Nguyen Duy Trinh, 67, is a Politburo member and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Trinh is regarded by some as having little influence and being nearly senile. []

Nguyen Co Thach, 58, is a Central Committee member and a Vice Foreign Minister. One of Vietnam's most capable diplomats, Thach is regarded by some as the real power in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. []

Phan Hien, 60, is a Vice Foreign Minister. Hien seems to have responsibility in the Ministry for managing relations with China, Kampuchea, and non-Communist Southeast Asia. He apparently sought to negotiate a settlement with the Pol Pot government in Phnom Penh before Vietnam's massive invasion, and also led Vietnam's delegation to the border talks with China. []

Into the Abyss

Circumstantial evidence suggests there may have been a general consensus in the leadership on Kampuchean policy, at least through the initial stage of the December 1978 offensive. Certainly the policy seems to have evolved slowly and in increments. Before making the decision in midsummer 1978 to launch a major offensive in Kampuchea, Hanoi had tried to resolve its border problems with Phnom Penh through private talks. When that failed it sought Chinese assistance, which was either refused or ineffective. Hanoi then launched a punitive strike in December 1977 in a final effort to bring Phnom Penh to its senses. []

[] by December 1978 whatever misgivings may have existed about using greater force against Kampuchea seem to have centered on potential world reaction, not on the necessity of the military operation or its likelihood of success. [] the Foreign Ministry as being particularly concerned about potential reaction abroad. Vice Foreign Minister Thach reportedly fretted over the effect on Western sources of aid, while some midlevel Foreign Ministry officials agonized over the reaction in non-Communist Southeast Asia. Anyone who doubted the wisdom of the military action itself probably was not in a position to protest too vigorously. After all, alternate solutions had been given a chance and they had failed. []

The initial disposition of Hanoi's forces, comments by a senior Soviet official, and Hanoi's failure to prepare a Khmer front group sufficiently large to administer the entire country all suggest that the decision to push the offensive across the Mekong and to go for a knockout blow in Kampuchea was not made until about a week after the invasion was launched. []

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[redacted] The lack of resistance encountered by Vietnamese forces in the first days of the invasion may have encouraged Hanoi to go all out. It may have drawn an erroneous parallel to the Easter offensive of 1975, which precipitated the collapse of the South Vietnamese Government after beginning as a major but limited campaign. [redacted]

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We have almost no information on how the top leadership lined up on the decision to go all out in Kampuchea; it is conceivable the Politburo was united. There is some reason to believe, however, that at least the leaders immediately below the top were divided on the issue. The Foreign Ministry, which was concerned about the consequences of a limited invasion, may well have had strong reservations about the wisdom of crossing the Mekong. The Ministry of Defense, [redacted]

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[redacted] had favored strong action all along, and under the circumstances—an apparent collapse of Pol Pot's forces—it seems likely it would have pushed for an all-out effort. [redacted]

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The actual architect of the drive may have been Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung. He reportedly made regular visits to the Vietnamese-Kampuchean border area in the weeks before the invasion and would seem to be the logical choice for overall command in view of his paramount role in planning the final campaign against South Vietnam. Dung—perhaps envisaging a repetition of his earlier success—may have argued for going all the way. Dung's execution of the campaign may leave him vulnerable to criticism, regardless of where he lined up on the issue of an all-out offensive, if Hanoi becomes bogged down in a war in Kampuchea it cannot win. [redacted]

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The Pull East and West

Unlike the policy for relations with Kampuchea, how best to maneuver within the Sino-Soviet-US triangle has been a contentious issue for some time. It seems, however, that since the end of the Vietnam war in 1975 the issue has been not whether to tilt toward Moscow or Beijing, but rather how vigorously to pursue an

opening to the West at the possible expense of better relations with Moscow. Relations with China had begun to deteriorate even before the war ended; with its termination, competing regional interests that had been submerged came to the forefront, most notably in Kampuchea. Although we can surmise that the entire Vietnamese leadership probably felt it was in the country's best interests to keep relations from deteriorating further, we have no real evidence that anyone in Hanoi was arguing for trimming Vietnam's ambitions and accommodating Beijing. Indeed, the Chinese themselves apparently believed that Vietnamese leaders who had once been sympathetic, including Dong, Dung, and economic experts and Politburo members Le Thanh Nghi and Do Muoi, turned cold after 1975. Certainly China—torn by its own internal political problems at that time—had less to offer of what Vietnam needed most, massive reconstruction aid, than either the Soviet Union or the West. The latter two also had the advantage in Vietnam's view of having less at stake in the region and of being farther away than China, thus probably being less willing and able to pressure Hanoi. [redacted]

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Premier Pham Van Dong seems to have had a great deal of personal prestige invested in overtures to the West. His trip to Europe in April 1977 to raise aid may not have had the full support of the Politburo. Circumstantial evidence suggests both Le Duan and Truong Chinh had reservations about it, and the Soviet Union apparently lobbied against it. Perhaps unfortunately for Dong, the trip seems to have produced less aid than the Vietnamese had hoped. Dong also may have suffered when efforts to improve relations with the United States came to nought last fall even after Hanoi had reversed its earlier position and dropped all preconditions for normalization, principally US aid.

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[redacted] Dong favored greater flexibility on this issue, while Duan and Chinh were hardliners on the aid question. [redacted]

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Perhaps not surprisingly then, rumors of Dong's political eclipse were widespread in Hanoi during 1978. Most versions held he would be moved up to a

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25X1 largely ceremonial post to coincide with the promulgation of a new constitution, an event that is yet to occur. According to some accounts, Dong would then be replaced as Premier by Giap, widely believed to be a rival of Dong. While such stories may not be entirely accurate, they may reflect a loss of prestige and influence. [REDACTED]

25X1 Dong's personal influence aside, by early 1978 veteran observers in Hanoi and some Vietnamese officials abroad believed Duan, Giap, and Le Duc Tho, the advocates of a harder line toward the West and the figures most inclined to see the Soviet Union as Vietnam's logical partner, had increased their influence. The cause-and-effect relationship is unclear, but their ascendancy coincided with a rapid deterioration in relations with China and a narrowing of the options available to Hanoi other than closer relations with Moscow. It was presumably under the direction of these men that ties with Moscow expanded rapidly during the summer and fall. Vietnam became a full-fledged member of CEMA (Council for Economic Assistance) in July, and in November Le Duan signed a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in Moscow that linked the signatories as never before. [REDACTED]

25X1 There is some evidence that Dong and Trinh, in particular, continued to have reservations about the wisdom of moving so close to the Soviet Union. Dong reportedly was upset, too, by the timing of the treaty signing. It came right on the heels of his swing through non-Communist Southeast Asia, during which he seems to have had some marginal success in allaying the suspicions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that Hanoi was Moscow's cat's-paw, as Beijing had been charging. Much of the good will created by Dong's trip dissipated with the treaty. Trinh was concerned that the pact would have a negative impact on non-Communist aid donors, and indeed, several announced they would review their assistance programs in light of the treaty. Truong Chinh, too, may have been less than enthusiastic about the new relationship with the Soviet Union. He reportedly had been unhappy with the drift toward the Soviets since 1976. [REDACTED]

Potential Fallout

Although the external threat probably has the immediate effect of drawing the leadership closer together, the Chinese invasion almost certainly exacerbated whatever undercurrents of discord may be present as well. It is impossible to gauge with any certainty how widespread or significant such resentment may be, and indeed, the very lack of other attractive options probably serves as a check on polarization. Still, muttering about the wisdom of a foreign policy that leads to such unpleasant consequences seems now more evident. Some middle-level Vietnamese officials seem disillusioned that the treaty with Moscow did not prevent the Chinese strike. Others are upset that the Soviet Union did not use force along the Sino-Soviet border to demonstrate its support for Hanoi. Both Moscow and Hanoi seem aware of these feelings, and both have attempted to defend Soviet actions during the crisis. Hanoi media have also made an effort to sell the xenophobic Vietnamese man in the street on the value of the relationship with the Soviets. More sophisticated audiences are getting similar treatment. 25X1

[REDACTED]

Nonetheless, the situation does not seem to be at a point as yet where there will be another shift in influence on the Politburo and an accompanying adjustment in policy. Indeed, the foreign policy line set last year seems to be hardening. The relationship with Moscow is certainly as close if not closer than before the Chinese invasion. Hanoi's decision in early April to drop its preconditions for border talks with Beijing cannot be taken as a sign Vietnam is ready to capitulate to China or even to begin serious discussion of their differences. The Vietnamese have in the past used talks as a propaganda forum and as a means of buying time while they upgrade their defenses. [REDACTED] 25X1

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Perhaps most importantly, it is not yet certain whether Vietnam's policy in Kampuchea has come a cropper. While things clearly are not going as Hanoi planned, Vietnam still feels it is in a position to win and is vigorously pushing its effort there. Any fundamental reversal in policy and power relationships among individual leaders will probably require an assessment in Hanoi that its situation in Kampuchea is hopeless.

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It is impossible to predict how soon changes in the leadership might occur or even if they will. Over the years Vietnamese leaders have shown a remarkable ability to adjust policy, close ranks, and push on even after the bitterest disputes. The fortunes of individuals have waxed and waned but there have not been wholesale purges at the top. Even major blunders have not ended careers as they would have in other Communist countries. Truong Chinh is the classic example. He was the author of an agrarian reform program in the early 1950s that was so ill-conceived that it sparked a revolt in Ho Chin Minh's home province; yet, Chinh survived and after a period in decline rose again to his present number-two position in the leadership. Given the advanced age and ill health of the Vietnamese leadership, it may well be that time will have a bigger role in remaking the Politburo than any in-house political wars.

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Nonetheless, some subtle reordering of influence among individual Politburo members may be beginning. The best evidence, as usual, is tenuous and negative—namely, the apparent drop off in rumors about Dong's decline. Given Vietnam's difficult economic and military position as a result of the policies of

the past year, it is possible to speculate that if the war in Kampuchea drags on and the relationship with the Soviet Union results in more frequent and less palatable demands on Hanoi by Moscow, the Vietnamese leadership might eventually conclude it is in its best interest to reach a *modus vivendi* with Beijing. It is possible that men like Duan, Giap, Tho, and Dung will become less influential as a result, while Dong, Trinh, Hien, Trach, and Chinh will be in a position to benefit. There is an additional complicating factor, however, namely that Dong and the others are themselves open to criticism on other counts.

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The Vietnamese are very good at masking debate within the leadership, and we are unlikely to see many signs of disagreement or maneuvering. Our best evidence that the political balance in the Politburo has changed is most likely to come after the fact—with signposts such as evidence of a cooling in relations with the Soviet Union, a retrenchment in Kampuchea, a relaxation in the military posture along the Chinese border, or a clear shift away from the strident anti-Beijing propaganda signaling a new line of march in Hanoi.

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